



Discussion Paper (7)

## **Russian views on refugees return and stabilization in Syria**

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## **Introduction**

When the major fighting in Syria had stopped, Russia immediately began a campaign of repatriation of Syrians who had fled to neighbouring countries. The Russian government developed a special programme focusing on rehabilitating infrastructure and job creation inside Syria. Its implementation was entrusted to the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD), working in cooperation with the Syrian authorities to assess the damage and provide necessary materials and equipment. While the programme achieved a measure of success in terms of reconstruction, the security of the returnees remained an issue. Russia has been willing to cooperate with the West for funding reconstruction efforts, so long as they relaxed their political conditionality. It also looked to the Gulf countries as an attractive, yet uncertain option.

### **Refugee return: Russian strategy**

Return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) has been an important component of Russia's strategy in Syria, aimed at establishing a stable regime that would be able to guarantee a permanent Russian presence at the military bases in Latakia and Tartous, and preserve Russia's long-term interests. Refugee return was essential because it achieved several strategic goals. First, it contained the growth of the Iranian influence, as most refugees are Sunni. Second, it ensured that the national armed forces were provided with enough recruits so that the military would become truly Syrian, and not comprised of numerous pro-Iranian militias. Third, it allowed the initiation of a full-scale economic reconstruction that would reduce Syria's dependence on foreign aid, both Russian and Iranian. Finally, it ensured the international legitimacy of the regime in Damascus.

In the summer of 2018, when the large-scale fighting was over, the Russian military began to implement the "Refugee Return Plan." This plan was detailed in a document that has not been made public, but is regularly mentioned by Russian officials. It involved the implementation, in cooperation with the Syrian authorities, of a set of measures aimed at creating conditions for the return of refugees and internally displaced persons. On July 18 2018, the Inter-agency Coordination Headquarters (ICH) for the return of refugees was created. This body was tasked with facilitating the process of refugee return. It included personnel from more than 20 Russian ministries and government agencies.

There were several actors controlling the repatriation of Syrian refugees. The Ministry of Defence was responsible for creating suitable conditions inside Syria, while the Foreign Ministry negotiated with neighbouring countries, primarily with Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. The conditions in these countries have been particularly harsh for the Syrian refugees and it is believed that they would be more willing than Syrians living in Europe to return home. Russia encouraged the Syrian authorities to inform refugees about the possibility of return, and there were also discussions with the Syrian authorities on the allocation of funds for the transportation of refugees to Syria by air and by sea.

According to the Russian authorities, about 1.7 million refugees might want to return to Syria, mainly from the neighbouring countries. According to data provided by the Russian MoD, in 2018 more than 183,600 IDPs returned to their homes and more than 129,890 refugees returned to Syria from other countries.

The “Refugee Return Plan” included the following elements:

- a) Reconstruction of housing and basic infrastructure: The Russian military closely monitored damaged infrastructure in liberated areas and the efforts of the Syrian authorities to rebuild it. In 2018, according to official statements, local authorities repaired 4,690 residential buildings, 266 hospitals, 1,464 schools, 284 water supply facilities, 274 bakeries, 1,022 electrical substations, and 14,239 industrial facilities.
- b) Facilitating border crossing: According to the Russian MoD, in 2018 eleven border checkpoints were organised with the assistance of the Russian Centre for Reconciliation.
- c) Amnesty: The Russian MoD ensured that the Syrian authorities continued to work on amnesty for persons who evaded military service, including those among refugees and former members of armed groups. As of January 28, 2019, 34,424 people were granted amnesty.
- d) Job creation measures included repairs of existing businesses and construction of new ones.

### **Emphasis on basic infrastructure**

For the Russian authorities the main condition for the return of refugees has been the reconstruction of basic infrastructure. Significant funds and a large amount of humanitarian aid were allocated for this purpose. Exact sums were not made public and there is very little public information about the reconstruction assistance, although it was announced by the MoD that in 2017 Russia sent construction equipment to Syria and more than four thousand tons of materials to rebuild infrastructure in areas liberated from terrorists. The materials were supplied and paid for by the Russian government through the MoD budget, which was classified. The military also relied heavily on the supplies from the Strategic Reserve (‘Rosrezerv’ in Russian), which is used in case of wars and natural disasters. Actual reconstruction work has been done by the local labourers, presumably under the supervision of the local authorities that later report to the ICH.

The Russian military constantly monitored infrastructure, medical facilities, schools and the availability of construction materials in liberated areas. For each community affected by the fighting there was an accurate list of needed materials. For example, according to the estimates of the Russian military, for the restoration of Saida the following items were required: dump truck, 32 cubic meters of cement, 18 floor slabs, 230 cubic meters of bricks, 18 duralumin windows, 1,400 meters of electrical cable, 2 electric substations to restore the water pumping stations.

An important component of the effort to create conditions for the return of refugees has been the clearance of land mines, in which Russian specialists are taking active part, though this work was transferred from the military to the Ministry of Emergency Relief.

### **Russia as guarantor for refugee return**

According to “Refugee Return Plan”, Russia considered it important to provide refugees with guarantees of security, amnesty and protection of their property rights, primarily real estate. It was seen as a vital condition for the return of refugees. This issue was regularly discussed at meetings with the Syrian authorities held by the Russian MoD.

The Russian military identified the security challenges that the returning refugees could potentially face (armed gangs, explosive devices, abuse by pro-regime forces), but they did not

provide any public reports. Unofficially, it was acknowledged, although without details, that there was rivalry between two actors about Syria's reconstruction – Russia and Iran. The Iranian project was aimed at turning Syria into a puppet state with a greater role for the Alawites and Shiites, making a Sunni refugee return a threat. Consequently, pro-Iranian institutions and factions within the ruling elite attempted to undermine Russian efforts.

Russian authorities consistently stressed their readiness to guarantee the security of returning refugees. Yet, their ability to do that was questioned because no specific security mechanism was developed. The situation on the ground was monitored by Russian officers and the military police during the occasional distributions of humanitarian aid, since there was not enough personnel to maintain a permanent presence even in liberated areas. Thus, the security of the returnees depended on the Syrian authorities. It was almost impossible to prevent abuses carried out by local police or intelligence.

Russian officials acknowledged privately that president Assad had “won the war but might lose the peace” if stabilisation activities and refugee return plans failed. Considerable efforts were made by both the MFA and the MoD to convince the Syrian leadership of the necessity to ensure that the returning refugees would not face any persecution or pressure from the authorities. The main security issues included amnesty for those who had ties with the opposition, suspension of military draft for eligible males, reissuance of documents and respect for property rights. The main difficulty was that Russia had no immediate leverage to enforce its vision while the Syrian leadership had been euphoric following the military successes of 2018.

### **Who pays the bill?**

Apart from security, funding the reconstruction was also a significant issue. This was the main motivation for Russia's interest to cooperate with other players, both global and regional. Russian officials wanted the West to participate in stabilisation and reconstruction efforts, but pointed out that the issue was severely politicised by the US and EU, which insisted on swift political transition as a precondition for any assistance. Moscow suggested that it might pitch the idea of greater transparency and better governance, e.g. on a local level, to the leadership in Damascus in return for financial support. In the meantime, the Europeans might provide funding for reconstruction projects through international institutions. As for the US, Russian authorities repeatedly stated that the Americans and their Kurdish allies should be responsible for reconstruction in the areas under their control.

The West was perceived by Russia primarily as a potential source of funding for stabilisation and reconstruction. Due to the politicisation of the reconstruction issue by the Western powers, Russia did not seriously consider them as potential partners. The emphasis was made on cooperation with the regional players – the Gulf states and Turkey, because they did not insist on significant political concessions, such as immediate democratic reforms, and possessed sufficient financial resources.

If Western countries or regional players decided to join the stabilisation and reconstruction efforts (assuming the political differences are settled), Russia could play a role of a coordinator on the ground. Russia already had a working mechanism for distributing humanitarian assistance and reconstruction aid in the government-controlled areas. The MoD gained considerable experience of cooperation with the local authorities, which relied on Russian supplies of construction materials and equipment. The military also collected extensive data on the damage

to basic infrastructure, schools, hospitals and other vital facilities. The Russian legacy of changing the course of war could be used to change the course of peace.